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ABSTRACT

The author characterizes current decision making in special education as arbitrary, based upon little or no data, and devoid of long-range planning. He proposes a planning and decision making model consisting of four components: overall coordination, data gathering, planning, and long range decision-making mechanisms. The model is explained to enable development of long range plans with an adequate, empirical basis. (CL)

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LINKING PROGRAM PLANNING, LONG-RANGE DECISION-MAKING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: A REAPPRAISAL OF THE STATE OF THE ART FROM THE USERS' VIEWPOINT

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INTRODUCTION

The "bottom line" to providing appropriate and sophisticated services and programs to exceptional students is a rational and soundly based decision-making process. In the general area of management one has extensive theorizing on what sound decision-making is and how accountability can aid that process. In fact, special educators have gotten to the point where they now have their own cult of accountability proponents (for review, see Proger, 1971). Yet, after viewing the program evaluation and decision-making processes in operation for over ten years in many different settings in special education, I am appalled at the almost total lack of both long-range and short-range planning, which is presumed to be a necessary ingredient to these vital processes. We, in effect, still "fly by the seat of our pants," spending enormous sums of money, all with a quite high per-pupil cost. Many elaborate schemes for linking program evaluation with decision-making have been proposed, but few (if any!) have stood the tests of time and practice.

This paper takes a cold, hard look at what educational technology has wrought over the past ten years or so, for the major developments in both general and special education have been over that time span for the still in-vogue areas of data-based decision-making, program planning, and program evaluation. On the basis of much frustrating practitioner/user experience, I will attempt to put forth what appears to be a workable scheme for these three interrelated areas, unfettered of all the theoretical niceties that several writers still keep espousing. Needless to say, this paper is not about day-to-day instructional decision-making (cf Proger & Mann, 1973).

SYMPTOMS SURROUNDING THE DECISION-MAKING FIASCO IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

This paper is based on a very simple premise, one that I consider to be data-based on my experience of viewing such topics in several different settings in several states: decision-making is extremely arbitrary, is based upon little or no data at all, and is totally devoid of any long-range planning. Let's examine these charges in greater detail.

To begin with, one could view such blasts as a cop-out type of criticism -- because the data for making such assertions clearly would have to come from the "dirty laundry" case studies of major moves made by administrators and supervisors over the years, such data is virtually unobtainable, and "we all know how the real world works." Cop-out or not, those who have been engaged in the decision-making process for extended periods of time would readily agree to the premise for most instances of decision-making in special education. Thus, let's proceed to the component symptoms of this premise.

First, decision-making is arbitrary. Generally, this situation appears to be a matter of force and not of choosing. The power brokers of special education -- administrators and key supervisors -- are generally overextended in their day-to-day basic duties already, before even worrying about such things as gathering (or even using available) data for decision-making, or engaging in well-thought-out, long-range planning processes. Thus, the making of key decisions is arbitrary." The bases for decisions is often nothing more than how much monies are available for the coming year, what pressures are coming from the regular education establishment at the moment, and to what extent should I make my own program area grow bigger and obviously better (the empire-building syndrome that seems to be an occupational hazard of those who eventually achieve positions

of power in the special education structure). Most crucial decisions for future program development are made, not surprisingly, at the time of new budget deliberations, in basically a defensive rather than offensive manner. It's not surprising that quickness and arbitrariness of decisions must be the result in the emotional pressures of the moment and the never-relenting classroom crises in the life of a supervisor or other key administrator.

Second, decision-making is usually not based on relevant data. Why? Here, the blame, I believe, should be put upon the program evaluator's shoulders (which role is usually a secondary responsibility put upon the regular supervisors' duties). The biggest problem here is that data (if it is collected at all) is usually so late in getting to the people who need it most that there is no way it can begin to aid decision-making. The data also is only peripherally related to the matters at hand. Then, too, most decision-makers do not know what types of data they need, or can keep in perspective what is feasible to collect.

Third, decision-making lacks adequate planning. If planning occurs at all, it is usually of a short-range nature -- how the immediate pressures of the moment can be dealt with and still have the show move forward (or backwards, depending upon one's viewpoint) for another year. Most program administrators and supervisors do not carry out a needs assessment for determining what the major problem areas of a program are. Apart from that problem, they do not devise a master plan of long-range growth of the program, regardless of whether or not that plan would be related to the needs assessment. (It is conceivable that some decision-makers create long-range plans without engaging in needs assessment -- still another variant on the inadequate decision-making dilemma.)

A SIMPLE, COMPREHENSIVE MODEL FOR THE LONG-RANGE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

What will be proposed here is a decision-making scheme put forth with the realization that there is no room for increasing the weight of duties already on the supervisor, key administrative staff, and other long-range decision-makers. I insert this preamble knowing full well what, for example, P.L. 94-142 will mean timewise for such individuals. The model has been kept as bare-bones as possible; the era of grandiose conceptualizations, flow charts, and so on is over; we know they don't work. The model consists of four components: overall coordination, data gathering, planning, and a paradigm for accountable decision-making.

Overall Coordination: In the past, whatever could be termed long-range planning and crucial decision-making was carried out on an individual, uncoordinated fashion for a given program by that program's supervisor or other responsible official. As a result, this task most frequently lapsed into the dilemma given earlier. It is clear that some single individual must take responsibility for the overall coordination of the input and execution phases of the decision-making, and that individual will normally not be the chief executive officer (e.g., Director of Special Education) of the total special education.

In effect, we are suggesting that a single person within the special education hierarchy be given the coordinating role. This person should be a colleague on a par with the supervisors of the various programs. This individual will normally be carrying his regular job duties but will now become the "Director of Research and Planning" for special education. I think that while a given special educator will have this extra burden put upon him, the fact that this task was usually not carried out previously and now will be done so by one of

the "inner circle" more than justifies the extra work load. This arrangement is also necessary in the vast bulk of school organizations which cannot afford the luxury of a full-time Director of Research and Planning. It should be noted that all of the concerns of this paper can be placed under the broad heading of "planning coordination," but that such a person does not himself make the decisions but merely attempts to guarantee that within each program of exceptionality, appropriate data gathering, planning, and a rational decision-making process occur.

Data Gathering: Now that a simple way has been decided upon to determine who is the "planning coordinator," the task is to devise simple ways in which adequate data for basing both planning and major decision-making can be obtained. There are some radical departures here that I must take from what I might have said a few years ago before we had been deluged by new laws, regulations, and so on.

The first position to be taken here is that long-range, crucial decision-making will not be based upon student performance data. This no doubt will appear heresy in the field of program evaluation. I personally would have been a prime force behind the use of student data as a major pivot for decision-making. No longer. There are compelling reasons. The feedback turnaround time at the program analytic level is terrible. Unless one has full-time measurement professionals or supervisors who enjoy working 24 hours a day, the tabulation of data into timely, useful form is hopeless. A second difficulty is the fact that normal cycles of overall data collection (e.g., spring only, fall and spring) by default do not allow input into decision-making at the crucial times of budget preparation (e.g., January through April, depending upon local practices). A third difficulty is the lack of agreement on what are valid measures for the

particular program goals and objectives of a supervisor and the ready availability of such measures; the pat answer of "build your own criterion-referenced measurement system" (e.g., Proger & Mann, 1973) avoids reality of most school organizations' resources. As a parting shot on this point, I should qualify everything by saying that student performance data as a secondary basis of decision-making is to be recommended but only with great caution. First, the limitations outlined above by default mean that such data input will be "old" in the sense of being from the previous school year or, at the best, from fall of the current year. Second, for those who do wish to use either norm-referenced data or criterion-referenced data, there are no agreed-upon methods of setting valid expectancies of student performance (see Proger & Mann, 1973, for discussion of different methods, as well as Proger et al., 1972).

Now that we have addressed the heretic notion of downgrading somewhat the role of NRM and CRM student data in long-range decision-making, just what <u>do</u> we put most weight upon. First, usually sometime during January and February, projections of what funds will be available to the school organization for the next school year are put forth. The implications of this data are obvious. Second, and most importantly, there must be administrative/supervisory subjective evaluations. Third, there must be instructional subjective evaluations. The data obtained in the second and third components are useful for either needs assessment or long-range planning, or both. (Needs assessment, incidentally, at the program-wide level rarely ever occurs in special education programs.) Let us now elaborate upon the second and third sources of data.

The administrative/supervisory subjective evaluations are one crucial component of program evaluation. Each year about January a given program's supervisors and/or master itinerant teachers are to fill out a <u>simple</u> form that

examines mostly current (and a bit of older) data. Appendix A contains an illustration. One can see that the emphasis is strictly on constructive criticism. The data is strictly subjective (or, "professionally speaking") but the premise here is that supervisors and/or master itinerant teachers are the sound judges of what they feel are the greatest needs of their program.

The instructional level of program evaluative feedback would be carried out at the same time as the supervisory/administrative level. Each year all instructional staff (teachers, clinicians, etc.) would complete this form. The emphasis of the data in the form given as Appendix B is similar to that in the previous form.

With regard to data input for both needs assessment and long-range planning, one can safely conclude that the two modes of eliciting professional judgments are simple and will not sink the ship. One can see also that the data is indeed judgmental and not merely descriptive. "Bottom-line" issues are being sought. One can also see how the data are being cycled parallel to the budget and long-range decision-making process.

In the cases of both instructional and administrative/supervisory data feedback, the planning coordinator (whoever has been assigned to that role position) is responsible for ensuring that the forms are sent out and are collected at the proper times. This raw feedback is then funneled back to the person in charge of a given handicap-area program. However, the planning coordinator must pick out the essences of representative feelings on his own, as must in a separate way the program official. Later, the reader will see how the discrepancies are used in the actual decision-making process.

Planning: The purpose of obtaining the two types of subjective feedback is to allow (and to force) the making of a long-range plan of change for each

given program. The data so gathered is a type of needs assessment, which step is a precursor to sound planning. Each program official will be required to put together a brief document that embodies their long-range plan of change, with specific practices that should be initiated, changed, or terminated. The general philosophy of program growth should also be spelled out (e.g., is the local district to assume direct responsibility for most classes, or should a county or intermediate unit do so).

Long-Range Decision-Making Mechanisms: The key feature to this entire structure is the actual making of a rationally-based decision -- the taking of a definite stand for change, not just maintaining the status quo as a non-decision. Each program official has already put together (each year) a brief plan of change; it is now to be required of him to put in writing what specific changes he recommends and why. Here, there are several options. The final decisions for change can be made, in one option, between the overall Director of Special Education and the person in charge of a given exceptionality program. In another instance, there might be a standing committee of all program officials who gather frequently for in-process decision-making, at which time the tentative changes could be discussed from all different viewpoints.

SUMMARY

This paper has presented a very simple yet elaborate planning and decision-making structure that is not dependent upon huge batches of data that have to be fit into next-to-impossible timelines. The model provides a framework in which to produce long-range plans of growth and/or change that have some degree of empirical basis. Other components can be added to the basic structure if a school organization feels it has the resources to become more complex and far-reaching.

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APPENDIX A

Proger

ADMINISTRATIVE/SUPERVISORY
PROGRAM EVALUATION
INPUT FORM

Date _____

Name _____

Program _____

1. What are the key strengths of the program at this point?

2. What are the key weaknesses of the program at this point?

3. What recommendations for change would you make at this point?

   A. Major changes that are probably feasible:

   B. Major changes that are probably unfeasible:

   C. Minor changes:

APPENDIX B

INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF
PROGRAM EVALUATION
INPUT FORM

Date _____

Name _____

Program _____

1. What are the key strengths of the program at this point?

2. What are the key weaknesses of the program at this point?

3. What recommendations for change would you make at this point?

   A. Major changes that are probably feasible:

   B. Major changes that are probably unfeasible:

   C. Minor changes: